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Contra probe puts heat on State official

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Washington

Elliott Abrams, the State Department's top Latin America official, appears to be in deepening trouble in connection with the Iran-contra scandal.

Sources close to the probe say the next few weeks will be crucial for Mr. Abrams as congressional investigators and the special prosecutor examine allegations that he violated Congress's ban on military aid to Nicaragua's contra rebels.

Abrams, who is 15th in line to testify before the Iran-contra investigating committees, adamantly denies any complicity in private efforts to circumvent the ban in 1985 and 1986.



Elliott Abrams: Is he on his way out?

But according to a US government official, both the special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh and congressional investigators "have so much stuff on Abrams" that even if he manages to avoid indictment he will most likely be "cut to pieces" when he appears before the congressional investigating committees.

Senate staff and informed legal sources say the special prosecutor's

office is considering indicting Abrams.

The US official says "whether or not he is indicted, Elliott will be politically finished. The State Department is in a tough position and the

bureaucracy will have to cough someone up and give them to the lions in order to protect itself. Elliott will be that someone."

The official also stated that Abrams will not have the protection of key former allies on the political right, including former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick and José Sornzano, currently the Latin America specialist on the National Security Council, and their allies in Congress.

They cannot forgive Abrams for his attempts to reform the contras and even remove Adolfo Calero, head of the largest contra army, from the leadership of the Nicaraguan resistance movement starting late last year, says this official.

Alienating the right

"Abrams didn't understand that these people are on a holy crusade and Calero is their sacred cow," says this official. "So that having alienated both the right and the left, Elliott will find very little backing behind him at the moment of truth."

The allegations against Abrams fall into two general categories.

First, that as chairman of a key interagency Reagan administration policy committee on Latin America, Abrams supervised - or at least was aware of - the contra resupply network now the object of the Iran-contra investigation.

The committee, known as the Restricted Interagency Group (RIG), was set up in 1981 in part to oversee the contra war against Nicaragua. The RIG includes representatives from the Pentagon and the CIA. One Abrams subordinate on the RIG was the NSC's Oliver North.

Abrams's critics say it would have been nearly impossible for the assistant secretary to have worked in such close proximity with Mr. North without knowledge of North's activities.

"He's much too smart to have been involved in [the RIG] and not to have asked the right questions," says one congressional opponent of contra aid.

"If there's any 'guilt' on Abrams's part, it was probably in not asking the right questions," says a former administration official, a strong supporter of contra aid. "He may just have decided to look the other way." Abrams insisted before the Tower Commission investigating the Iran-contra scandal that "We did not engage in, nor did we really know anything about this private network."

A State Department source close to Abrams says too much has been made of the Abrams-North connection.

"What you've got here is a big supposition that Ollie North must have talked to Abrams," says this official. "Who says? Abrams had no knowledge of North's illegal activities. Not one word has come out to indicate Ollie was closer to Elliott than anyone else on the [RIG]."

The second charge involves Abrams' overseeing the activities of two US ambassadors who may have played a role in efforts to abet the contra war.

News reports say US ambassador to El Salvador Edwin Corr met repeatedly with Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA official who directed secret contra resupply flights from El Salvador's Ilopango air base. Ambassador Corr has indicated that he was aware of the supply flights but denies any role in "supervising" the flights, which carried arms airdropped to the contras inside Nicaragua.

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Former US ambassador to Costa Rica Lewis Tambs told the New York Times that he was directed by the RIG to give logistical help to the contras and to American pilots airlifting weapons and supplies to the rebels from a secret airstrip near the Nicaraguan border. Responding to what he says was a directive from North, seconded by Abrams, Tambs says he also helped build a southern - Costa Rican - front in the contra war.

"Elliott did not give Tambs those instructions," says the State Department source close to Abrams. "The whole story as we know it now is one of individuals making certain representations of authority that may not be true."

'Thin credibility'

Abrams himself has denied all allegations of wrongdoing in connection with the Iran-contra affair, but Capitol Hill sources say the credibility of the assistant secretary has worn thin. After having

denied direct knowledge of the supply network before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in October 1986, Abrams later revealed that "we had pretty good information" on the supply network.

Abrams later sidestepped a query from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence about third-party funding. Later he apologized to the committee for not revealing that he had solicited \$10 million in contra aid from the Sultan of Brunei, conceding that his earlier explanation had "left a misleading impression." The \$10 million, which was deposited in a Swiss bank account by Oliver North, has since disappeared.

"Most members of Congress would feel that it's not every day you get \$10 million from the Sultan of Brunei," says a congressional source. "Abrams has not gone out of his way to keep Congress fully informed... It raises serious questions."

The administration official close to the contra issue traces the loss of support for Abrams among conservatives to his efforts to create a reformed, modernized contra movement headed by former Sandinista official Arturo Cruz.

"Elliott is an intelligent man but he never appreciated what he was dealing with," says this official. "He never understood that the people in the White House and the [Central Intelligence] Agency and others on the right are not mere politicians but moral crusaders. He also underestimated the depth of the vested interests supporting Calero and the contra movement as is, especially in the CIA."

Today, according to the official, Abrams, who used to be in daily contact with contra moderates, has withdrawn and the CIA is back in the saddle.

One moderate contra official says, "we used to see Elliott every day. Now it's strictly the CIA that handles our day-to-day operations."

The administration official adds that "the State Department thinks that the whole contra issue is a can of worms and they'd rather see it explode in the CIA's face than in theirs."

Asked to describe Elliott Abrams, friends and associates invariably use the same adjectives: "bright," "ambitious," "forceful," "ideologically committed."

Nonconformist

Acquaintances also describe the controversial assistant secretary as a lifelong political nonconformist. In the 1960s, as a Harvard student, Abrams supported Hubert Humphrey, while others of his antiwar generation gravitated toward Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy.

Later, when George McGovern picked up the anti-war standard, Abrams supported the conservative wing of the Democratic party led by Washington senator Henry M. Jackson.

"He was culturally isolated from much of his generation," says one congressional source who has dealt with Abrams frequently. "In a way, his career at State is a kind of reaction to that; it's as if he's answering his own youth."

Abrams capped his evolution away from his Democratic roots by signing on with Democrats for Reagan in 1980. The same year, he married the daughter of writer and editor Midge Decter and step daughter of Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz, two of the intellectual godparents of the "neoconservative" movement that bolted from the Democratic party after the McGovern nomination.

Abrams has held the post of assistant secretary of state three times under President Reagan. In addition to the Latin America bureau, he has headed the State Department offices that deal with international organizations and human rights.

As head of the human rights bureau, Abrams received mixed reviews. Human rights groups credited him with being a forceful advocate for human rights reforms in countries such as Chile and Paraguay.

But in Central America, where criticism of human rights practices risked bringing down regimes friendly to the US, Abrams was more cautious. Human rights groups say Abrams minimized extensive abuses committed by military regimes like those in El Salvador and Guatemala, while reserving criticism for groups that brought the abuses to light.

So far there have been no calls in Congress for Abrams's resignation. But some sources privately say his days may be numbered, especially if North implicates him in testimony.